

The Politics of Imperfection

The Critical Legacy of Surrealist Anti-colonialism

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the Surrealists' anti-colonialism, arguing that the Surrealist movement held a resolute line of political commitment that preceded and outran its relation to Communism. This is a more positive view of Surrealism's engagement with politics than has been evident in much scholarly writing.

Earlier post World War II accounts of the Surrealist movement, influenced by Marxism, foregrounded its torturous attempt to marry its energies with the French Communist Party, and dismissed it as a failed avant-garde that lapsed into mere style by the mid-to-late 1930s. A more recent 'cultural studies' lens, informed by feminism, inflected with post-structuralism and shaped by post-colonial studies, permits a broader view. Yet some commentators who take their cue from newer disciplinary influences are, in their own ways, censorious of Surrealism's appropriation of non-European cultural artefacts, positing a conflict between the movement's visual praxis and its anti-colonial stance. By contrast, this thesis argues that the stylistic experimentation engaged in by the Surrealists – a range of collage-montage, appropriation, *détournement* and display strategies – were means for exploding received ideas about colonialism, societal evolution and race; ideas that justified cultural imperialism. Some art historical writings contribute to such a view.

Through an examination of the tracts, poems and objects that engage with issues of colonialism and 'the cultural other', this thesis aims to demonstrate that Surrealism did not abandon its critical and emancipatory aims, and nor did it uncouple political critique from poetic and visual experimentation. Particular chapters are devoted to anti-colonial tendencies and collage-montage strategies evident in the 1920s and Thirties, and further developments in the post-World War II era when the Surrealists' exhibitions relied on radical displacement and theatrical staging. Furthermore, the thesis invites a reassessment of Surrealism's transgressive potential and its use-value for post-colonialism, by demonstrating its continued relevance for understanding work by Australian artists who refer to Australia's colonial heritage: Imants Tillers, Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt.

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